

CUBA'S FUTURE

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What would it be like to live in a tropical paradise, but to be banned from using its most beautiful beaches; live blocks away from fine restaurants, but not be allowed to eat in them? To be required to get government permission to buy a car, to rent an apartment, or leave the province in which you live? To be spied on by your neighbors and made to participate in group "acts of repudiation" against neighbors who flouted the government's restrictions? Welcome to Cuba.

Vaclav Havel, former political prisoner, leader of Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution, and eventual president of an independent republic, once argued that totalitarian regimes fear and imprison dissidents because they represent the potential of human freedom. Regimes that govern through lies, fear, and intimidation cannot abide individuals who remain true to themselves and their aspirations. Individuals who dare to question such regimes find themselves in prison. In Cuba today, over 300 political prisoners languish in its jails.

In March 2003, the Cuban regime arrested and imprisoned 75 members of Cuba's democratic civil society for such "crimes" as organizing seminars on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, running a library, and writing uncensored articles, essays and poems about life in Cuba. In June 2005, others were arrested for organizing a protest outside the French embassy.

Some of these prisoners have been given "conditional releases" (for health reasons) dependent on their behavior. While out of prison, many have been subject to harassment, intimidation, and violent attack. In recent weeks, the regime has released some well-known dissidents, while other activists have been beaten and arrested. The message is clear: The regime will not tolerate independent political activity that undermines its ability to control Cuba's future.

The systematic repression of dissent should be unacceptable in a hemisphere that, through the Inter-American Democratic Charter, declared, "The peoples of the Americas have a right to democracy and their governments have an obligation to promote and defend it." It should be unacceptable in a larger community of democratic nations that has committed itself to fundamental

freedoms and political liberty. The Cuban people deserve to elect their leaders just like everybody else in the hemisphere.

The U.S. does not seek to impose its model on Cuba. To paraphrase Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, you cannot impose democracy, but you can impose tyranny. As she said recently, “If you ask people, ‘Do you want to live in a society in which you have some say in who will govern you, in which you can educate your children, both boys and girls, in which you can speak your conscience, in which you can worship freely, in which you can associate to promote your interests, the sort of basics of democracy,’ most people will say yes.” Asking that in Cuba can land you in jail.

When Fidel Castro became ill, he transferred power to his brother and a small group of individuals who represent the bureaucracy and institutions of Cuba’s totalitarian state. They have prepared for this moment for years by improving their internal policing, increasing censorship, blocking foreign access to Cuba’s democratic civil society, and further closing any independent spaces existing in Cuba.

At this uncertain moment, Cuba sits between hope and fear. Hope for a political opening that would lead to a free and democratic Cuba ready to regain its place among the democratic nations of the Americas. Fear that the regime will attempt to perpetuate itself, and the privileges of its elites, through increased repression and jailings, deepening the isolation of the Cuban people.

Now is the time for the international community to tell the Cuban people that it stands in solidarity with their democratic aspirations, and will provide the political and economic support necessary to make those aspirations real.

The first step is for the international community to call on the regime to free its political prisoners, stop the persecution, restore individual political and economic rights and start down a path that leads to free elections. The dialogue that needs to take place is one between the Cuban authorities and the Cuban people about the democratic future of the island. We look forward to the day when the people of Cuba will enjoy the same freedoms as citizens of democracies everywhere.